

AI INDEX: EUR 70/61/98
18 AUGUST 1998 -- FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Deaths of two more Albanians in custody highlight the fears for hundreds of Kosovo detainees

The appalling news that another ethnic Albanian detainee died yesterday in custody in Kosovo, allegedly after police torture, highlights the dangerous situation of hundreds of ethnic Albanians in police custody in Kosovo, Amnesty International said today.

The death of Cen Dugolli follows the death three weeks ago of another detainee, Rexhep Bislimi, a human rights defender and former prisoner of conscience, also allegedly from injuries from police torture.

"The situation for detainees in Kosovo is grave", Amnesty International said. "Detainees have no power to enforce their rights. Therefore the international community must press for the police to ensure their safety and wellbeing, access to lawyers and to family, and to medical care."

Amnesty International is also calling for an immediate and impartial investigation into the two latest deaths, and for anyone found responsible to be brought to justice

Cen Dugolli, from Urosevac (Ferizaj in Albanian), died on 17 August in Hospital in Priština. An activist of the Democratic League of Kosovo, the largest ethnic Albanian political party in the province, he had been arrested on 21 June and, together with four other men, held for investigation on charges of terrorist acts. The day before his death, Cen Dugolli was taken from detention to Priština hospital where he reportedly underwent surgery.

Cen Dugolli's lawyer, Destan Rukiqi, has himself also been hospitalized with serious damage to his kidneys, again said to have been caused by ill-treatment in detention. He was arrested and sentenced to 60 days' imprisonment on 24 July, after he protested to an investigating judge who had refused to allow him to make notes from Cen Dugolli's court dossier.

Human rights activist Rexhep Bislimi, a father of three also from Urosevac, was arrested on 6 July. On 20 July it was reported that he was in an intensive care ward in Priština hospital, with broken ribs and severe bruising. He died the following day, apparently after undergoing surgery on his kidneys.

Other detainees said to have recently received treatment in hospital include Islam Thaci, who is said to have jumped from an upper floor of Prizren police station after being arrested on 28 July.

"Allegations of torture and ill-treatment in custody were routine in Kosovo even before the outbreak of the current conflict", Amnesty International. "What is different now is that there are hundreds of detainees in police custody, all vulnerable, and the current climate is likely to lead to even greater disregard for the most basic human rights."

Since the outbreak this year of armed conflict in Kosovo, there have been widespread arrests of ethnic Albanians suspected of being members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) or of supporting or aiding its operations. Over 350 ethnic Albanians are currently under investigation on charges of this kind, and countless others have been and continue to be detained for periods of several hours or days, before being released.

"There have been many reports that those released were brutally tortured and ill-treated in custody, and many are said to have sought medical treatment for the injuries they suffered at the hands of police", Amnesty International noted.

Further arrests are reported daily: according to a Belgrade newspaper, a senior officer of the Serbian police recently predicted mass arrests in towns such as Priština, Podujevo and Mitrovica which lie outside the immediate areas of armed conflict.

Families sometimes do not learn for many days, or longer, where their relatives are held, and there are cases of feared "disappearances". The relatives of Dr Hafir Shala, who worked as a physician in Glogovac (Glogovc in Albanian) in the Drenica region have reportedly been trying to locate him since 10 April, when the car in which he was travelling was stopped by police in a village near Priština.

"The history of political trials in Kosovo shows that torture and ill-treatment are methods frequently used to obtain confessions or incriminating statements from detainees; again and again convictions have been overwhelmingly based on such statements, even when defendants have retracted them in court, and when there has been little, if any, other evidence to support the charges," Amnesty International said.

The Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre (HLC), which observed one such trial in June this year, noted that although the defendant, Naim Krasniqi, withdrew in court his earlier statements, claiming they had been forced from him by beatings and electric shocks, the presiding judge accepted these statements as evidence and refused to examine the still visible bruises on his body. Naim Krasniqi was convicted and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.

Amnesty International fears that many ethnic Albanians currently under investigation may have similarly been forced by torture or ill-treatment, while held in police custody, to make "confessions", which risk being used against them in court, in defiance of international standards for fair trial.

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